

# Upgrade for visitor center

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There's a problem with the visitor center at Fort McHenry. It's old.

Well, okay. Not old the way the fort is old. The fort is, after all, an historic shrine. Cannonballs and measles were still a major health threat in Baltimore when Fort McHenry was built.

By visitor center standards, however, the low, flat brick building at the fort (which houses, among other things, an information desk, exhibits, a gift shop and an educational theater) is ancient.

The center was originally built in the 1960s, a time before wheelchair accessible restrooms were even on the radar. Before schools started making a beeline for the place between September and June. And before tourists came to Locust Point from all over the country - and all over the world.

And things haven't gotten better with age.

"Some of the deficiencies in the visitor center were identified in 1968," says Laura Joss, the fort's superintendent. "Then they were noted again in the master plan in 1988."

The center was built in the early 1960s with the expectation that it would host approximately 200,000 tourists a year. As the Inner Harbor gained popularity, however, and as other nearby Baltimore attractions, such as the National Aquarium and the Baltimore Museum of Industry began drawing in class trips, the numbers of people walking across Fort McHenry's sloping lawns and examining the cannons and powder magazine took a dramatic upturn.

"We're now over 600,000 a year," adds Joss. "Cultural tourism is really growing, plus the fort is a patriotic icon, so you get a lot of history buffs coming here from up and down the coast."

Because the crowds are getting larger, the auditorium, which has a capacity of 70 people, is no longer of an adequate size.

"About thirty to forty percent of our school groups have to bypass the movie when they come to the park," says Joss. She and other park officials would like to see the theater replaced with a facility that could hold between 150 and 200 people at each viewing. (The movie, which details the fort's history and its place in the Battle of Baltimore and the writing of "The Star-Spangled Banner," is an integral part of the visitor experience and helps put the landscape of the fort, and of the surrounding water and city, into historical context. Under ideal circumstances, visitors would see the movie first, then tour the fort.)

The rest rooms also need improvement. Presently, the only handicapped-accessible bathroom is in a recently built structure located outside the visitor center. Joss said that while the staff has not heard a lot of complaints over this, there have been a few patrons who are indignant about having to make a trip outside.

The current visitor center, she adds, has another big shortcoming: its location. When visitors come into the parking lot, the first thing they see is the center itself, rather than the fort.



"It's right in the sightline of the historic fort," she states. "It shouldn't be the first thing people see."

A new and improved facility would also have increased space for offices for the park's administrative personnel. At the moment, the fort's offices are included not only in parts of the visitor center, but in other historic buildings on the grounds. Joss says that the fort's personnel should be located in their own designated offices, rather than in the older buildings.

"We'd also like more room for exhibits," she says, "so that people can put the Battle of Baltimore in the context of the War of 1812." She would also like to see more space for an exhibit dedicated to the Chesapeake Bay.

The problems and shortcomings of the current facility read like a laundry list, and the wish list for the new facility is equally long. But the solution is going to take planning. The fort is asking for comments on what is needed on its grounds, and for its tourists, from agencies, groups and individuals. It is planning to hold at least one, and possibly more, public open houses to provide a forum for discussion. The first will be held on Tuesday, January 13, 2004, with another in the works, possibly in the spring.

There is a lot to discuss, says Joss, and suggestions are always welcome in the design process. The result of the discussion may be one new building to house all facilities, or it may be more than one. She does not, however, want to reduce what she terms "the fort's green space" by overbuilding, nor does she want a building that contrasts too sharply with the historic fort's ambience.

The open house, she says, will be followed by efforts to raise money for the new building. Fort McHenry will compete for funding within the National Park Service, although some private fundraising will likely be done as well by the Patriots of Fort McHenry, according to Joss. (The Patriots group is a non-profit group under the organizational umbrella of Living Classrooms).

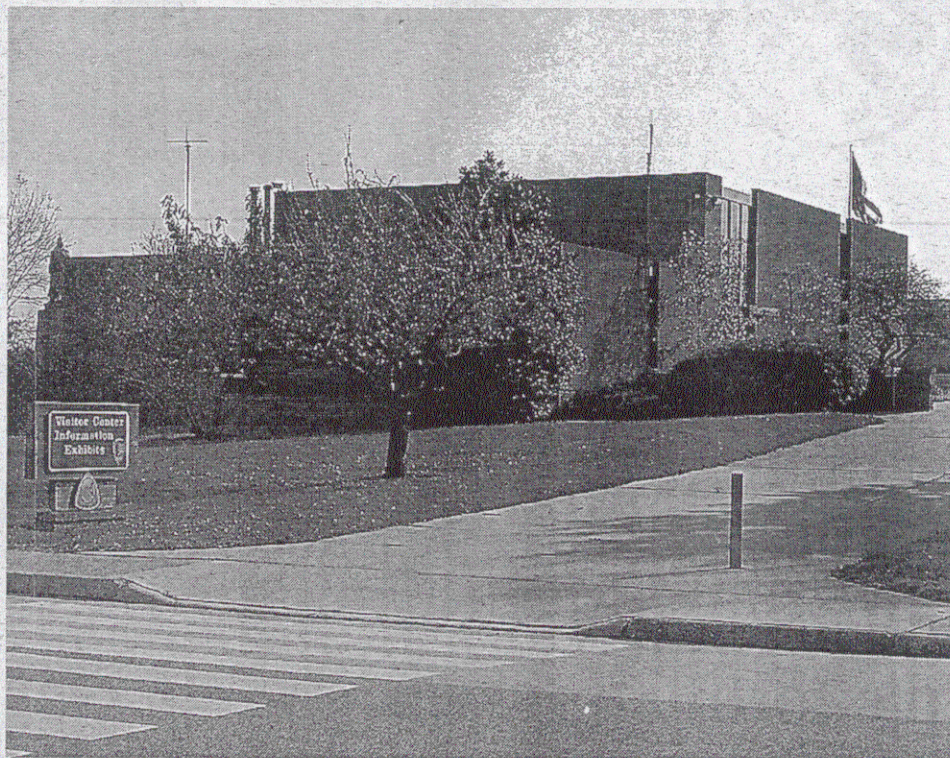
Funding is a five-year process, which realistically means that a new educational and administrative facility could be in place for the fort's bicentennial, the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Baltimore, which will be celebrated between 2012 and 2014.

According to information distributed by the fort, a Development Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment will be developed in concert with a Cultural Landscape Report, Alternative Transportation Plan, and Boundary Survey. These elements will help fort personnel determine site options for a new facility. The reports are expected to be available in time for the forum in the spring.

Note: Fort McHenry will host its first public open house to discuss the park's facilities on Tuesday, January 13, 3 p.m.-5 p.m. and 6 p.m.-8 p.m. at the visitor center. Comments can also be made to Superintendent Laura Joss at 410-962-4290 ext. 223 or [fomc\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:fomc_superintendent@nps.gov).



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**OLD FASHIONED**—The Fort McHenry Visitor Center, built in the 1960s, lacks some modern conveniences such as an ADA-equipped bathroom and a theater large enough to accommodate the many tour buses that come through. The fort is taking the public's suggestions for a new facility.

Photo by Elizabeth A. Gardner